

# Racial and Economic Segregation in U.S. Schools

David R. Riemer

It is no accident that our publicly funded K12 schools are segregated along racial and economic lines. It is not a coincidence that America's children, based in large part on their race or ethnicity, or their parents' place in the economic pecking order, receive unequal educations. Bigotry and government policy worked together to produce both results.

In the Deep South and the rural areas in some northern states, state laws required the segregation of public schools by race from the end of the Civil War until 1954. Outright legal segregation only ended officially with the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Sadly, even as *de jure* segregation of K12 schools started to come to an end in the 1950s and 1960s, *de facto* segregation became more extensive, particularly in the nation's rapidly expanding metropolitan areas.

Black and white children had always been segregated in metropolitan areas. In the south, it was the law. In the north, racial discrimination in housing, combined with "neighborhood school" policies, tended to concentrate black, Hispanic, and white children in different metropolitan schools. Racially biased school boards made the degree of segregation even worse. In the City of Milwaukee, for instance, the school board intentionally drew neighborhood school attendance areas so as to cluster black students together and keep them apart from white students. Indeed, Milwaukee's bigoted school officials went even further. When overcrowded conditions in certain all-black neighborhood schools required the transfer of black students to mostly-white neighborhood schools, the black students were kept in all-black classrooms—at times, in trailers on the playground—in order to preserve as much segregation as possible.

Government action aimed at maintaining school segregation in metropolitan areas was not limited, however, to such blatant acts. Even as outright bigotry on the part of school boards and administrators subsided, an "imperfect storm" of private bias and public policy worsened the extent and duration of school segregation by race and class.

Three primary factors combined to concentrate a growing share of the nation's low-income children, disproportionately black and Hispanic, in racially and economically segregated inner-city neighborhoods: (1) outright racism in the real estate and banking industries (initially required by federal housing agencies like the FHA); (2) biased zoning policies that blocked lower-income families from renting or buying in certain metropolitan—especially suburban—neighborhoods, where only higher-end homes could legally be built (e.g., thanks in large part to the imposition of costly minimum acreage and square footage requirements); and (3) post-WWII transportation policies that

sucked the middle class into rigidly zoned suburbs. Grounded on the underlying pattern of racial and economic segregation in metropolitan housing, the ancient 1830s' policy of linking a child's residence to the child's school assignment inevitably resulted (or so it seemed) in segregating urban and suburban schools by race and class.

Thus, thanks to the poisonous mix of racism and reinforcing strands of government intervention in education, housing, and transportation, America's urban low-income black and Hispanic children continue to sit today for the most part in the same classrooms and schools as other urban low-income black and Hispanic children. From morning until mid-afternoon, Monday through Friday, September through June, their lives are utterly disconnected from their mostly white, higher-income, fellow students. Meanwhile, on the urban periphery and in most American suburbs, the children of middle-class and high-income families—overwhelmingly white—by and large attend racially segregated and economically stratified schools with kids like themselves.

We have come a long way from overt Jim Crow. But Jim Crow still rules the schools.